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The Lab Report, volume 05, issue 02

Todd Ristau

Hollins University, tristau@hollins.edu

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Playwright's Lab
at Hollins University

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The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 05, Issue 02 (July, 2011)

Messages to You by Sunny da Silva at Studio Roanoke

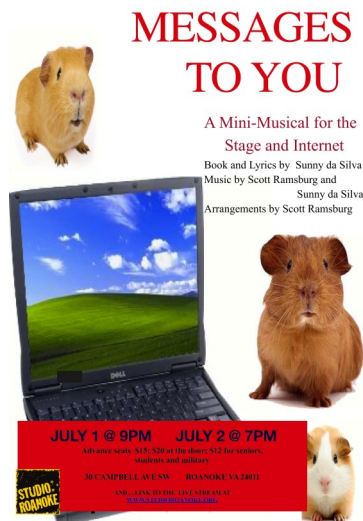
Sunny da Silva completed her final summer in the program last year and moved to New York City with her family. She is currently working off campus on her thesis play, *Bloom*, with her advisor Bonnie Metzgar. She returned to Studio Roanoke this month to present a new multi-media project combining live actors and streaming video. All arrangements, including auditions for the play, were conducted via Skype. Local actress Collette Riddle has the role of the only character in the play, an agoraphobic shut-in named Molly.

Molly is tentatively reaching out via her computer to a potential boyfriend and her yearning to have a relationship outside of her brood of pet guinea pigs who are her only living companions. The audience become video voyeurs as we watch Molly send podcasts to

her unresponsive virtual beau while watching that podcast projected onto a screen above the set knowing that it is also simultaneously being broadcast around the world.

Sunny not only envisioned and wrote the text for the project, but took on the task of directing the play herself. Original music for the play was scored by MFA playwright Scott Ramsburg.

"This was an experiment to see if a piece could be developed that would truly be live theatre for the internet, and not a recording of a stage play," da Silva told us. "The computer screen was a beast all in itself and I had to block and direct for that while keeping in mind the live audience in the theater. I also had to choreograph musical numbers just using the hands, face, upper body and puppets. It was



fascinating!"

Some of the groundwork for the play was laid in the Writing Plays with Music class Sunny took last summer with Jeff Goode. She credits the program with helping her make the contacts that made the project possible. All six videos are archived on YouTube.

<http://youtu.be/LVbGcUzaa9E>

Student Spotlight: Marshall Opie



Marshall Opie told us, "I am really humbled to be part of this program and to work with some dynamic people. I decided it was time to take my writing, my passion, seriously and read more about the

program. I knew that Hollins was it, and I didn't look for any other program. I'm definitely a Christian and I thank the Lord Jesus for bringing me here."

Marshall is the Artistic Director and founder of Roll On! Productions and the 2002 recipient of the National Theatre's New Playwright Grant Award. He has a long history of experience in corporate management and has been dedicated to serving and supporting urban schools, churches and inner-city families.

Opie earned a BS in mathematics with a minor in

civil engineering from Howard University and while teaching he shared his love of theatre with his students producing and directing plays and musicals.

Marshall worked with Clyde's Restaurant Group to design and implement its non-profit training arm, SCHOOL/WORK Foundation, Inc, serving as its Executive Director for ten years before returning to teaching and found his theatre company.

We're looking forward to working with Marshall to fulfill his professional goals and support his effort to use his talent and craft to improve his local community.

www.rollonproductions.com/Artistic_Director___Founder.html

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Guest Profile: W. David Hancock



David Hancock has received Obie Awards for his plays *The Convention of Cartography* and *The Race of the Ark Tattoo*. He earned his own MFA from the University of Iowa Playwright's Workshop. His plays have been produced by theatres around the country and most recently his newest play, *BOOTH*, premiered at Studio Roanoke in April.

Hancock is perhaps best known as a writer of non-linear, groundbreaking plays and so we were thrilled to have him come to campus to speak to our students while many were taking a course in experimental playwriting from another Iowa colleague, Ruth Margraff.

After David's talk, he took questions from our students.

Why do you do what you do?

There's something really seductive about theatre and I don't know what it is. I've been trying to figure that out, because it surely is a really challenging thing to do. There are days that go by when I don't write, but it's hard to find a week that has gone by in the last 25 years that I've not written something that by it's very nature I have to rely on somebody else on the planet to help me with. And that's a very interesting, basic need but also a

scary thing. I think I'm constantly looking at why do I keep doing that when that's so hard. It's not just like writing a poem that I can show to my wife. My wife might really like it, but if it's a play, my wife has to be an actor in it, which is a whole new level of challenge. In college, they started to lure me into the theatre, it's like being lured into a van with a puppy dog. They need you to help them find their lost pet. You know, "*There's nobody else that can do the light board like you, David.*" or "*We lost the actor in this play and you're perfect for the role.*" You know, so I started making plays in college and it was a very small theatre department and I was

really fortunate. I got to be a part of a lot of really big, important plays. We did *Mother Courage*, we did *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*, we even did *Hot L Baltimore*. We were doing everything in this tiny theatre. I directed *Buried Child* there. There were a lot of good opportunities. And I wrote a play, and they produced it, and that was the beginning of the end.

And then you went to graduate school?

I got into Iowa. It was a place to go for writers. It was mysterious. East of Central Pennsylvania was like the jungle. It was like going to Japan or something. And I struggled. You know, I'd do a play people didn't really understand and I'd get a C. I just never really connected.

How do you deal with being at the mercy of people who don't understand your work?

I think you have to be true to yourself. Your vision, and just keep working at that. Don't let people tell you that your work isn't good, that you have no future in the theatre. You have everything you need to tell your story and to find an audience for your work. Everybody has that.



What are your impressions of the program at Hollins?

I think it is really terrific. Todd brings in, present company excluded, some really important people for a playwright's development. People that can help you out, people that have really important things to say to you—a wide variety of guests and I think that's a huge thing. You bring in a lot more guests than most programs. I also think that it is really cool that it is a summer intensive for six weeks and then you get to go and have a life, rather than staying here for three years just trapped. Because sometimes in school your plays become about plays and not about real life.

Any advice for playwrights just getting started?

There's a multiplicity of ways to approach theatre and it's a big field. There are all different types of playwrights. And, fortunately, if you write a play, it's not like a limited resource. You may have limited financial resources, but if you have a play and you really want to do it you can do it. I encourage you all, in terms of the big picture, to go out and follow your own personal vision and path. And if you want to sell out, that's really great too. I wish I could sell out. I've been trying for thirty years, but nobody wants to buy me.

Reading of Hancock's *SECONDS* at Mill Mountain Theatre

W. David Hancock premiered his play *BOOTH* at Studio Roanoke in April. The playwright was so inspired by the production, directed by Todd Ristau, that he wrote a sequel and dedicated it to the cast. That play is called *SECONDS*, and it was read at Mill Mountain Theatre this summer during Hancock's visit to Hollins as a guest speaker.

Ristau also directed the reading and reunited the cast of *BOOTH*, which includes MFA playwright Chad Runyon. The playwright read the stage directions, which are a kind of observer's running commentary on the action of the play. The stage directions are written to be projected, as in *BOOTH*, but due to technical difficulties the projected slides were impossible to incorporate.

David commented, "I think having me there and I'm not a fake guy, I'm really the playwright, adds something to it that might be hard to engage with in a certain way. There's a meta level that is not intended by just having me there. I think with slides, those aren't necessarily a playwright saying

those things, there's somebody who is just recording this."

"There are some parts in both plays that just crack my heart in half," Runyon said in the discussion after the reading.

"I didn't hear a playwright in the stage directions," Marshall Opie, a director himself and a new MFA playwright, offered. "I heard a character writing the play. Those things really worked for me, and I think even if I were to read it, I would still see a character writing a play."

Ristau responded, "He may disagree with me, but I think that all of David's body of work at one level or another is about writing and a relationship to writing—whether that is as the person creating the material or the person who is observing or participating as a reader. I think this play does that more directly than any of his other plays."

"I kept imagining it as Twitter feeds," Elizabeth Heffron commented.



Bob Moss followed up, saying, "I kept wondering what it would be like to see it being written in real time by the guy with his back to us. I mean, that would be terrifying!"

Rebecca Quirk said, "It's heartbreaking how much the narrator wants to insert himself into the character's stories."

"It's always fascinated me, that paradox," Hancock responded. "Can you be a savant, or write about one? I would hope that however it is done, with the guy over there or the projections, that there is a tension between not knowing if what they're saying is just being recorded or the recording is selective. What do we do as writers but record, and where is the art in that?"

Elizabeth Heffron's Radio Play in *SANDBOX RADIO* Live!

ONE NIGHT ONLY! Monday, June 20th
at West of Lenin, 203 N 36th Street
www.brownpapertickets.com
FREE admission
doors at 7:30
show at 8:00

LIVE!

SANDBOX

radio www.thesandboxac.org

The Sandbox Artists Collective is a group of mid-career theater artists who got together a couple of years ago to share resources, work together, and encourage each other to continue to develop

as artists. One of their purposes is to create new work together—Sandbox Radio is such a project. Members of the collective wrote plays especially for the radio to be performed in front of a live

audience with original music and foley effects, and simultaneously broadcast on June 20th. The entire event was recorded and is available as a podcast online.

MFA playwright Elizabeth Heffron participated as a writer, along with short plays, poetry and songs by nearly a dozen other writers. The show was held at West of Lenin, a new theatre in the Fremont area of Seattle, WA.

Her play, *Irreducible Howard*, tracks the life of an ordinary, mediocre man from cradle to the grave. It was read by Eric Ray Anderson.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth couldn't attend the event in person,

because she was already in Roanoke for the start of the summer session.

"The seed for the radio-play I wrote came from an exercise in the class I took with Kate Bredeson last summer," Heffron told us. "I was excited by the opportunity to develop it further with Sandbox. I was sorry not to be there to watch the audience reaction, but am thrilled that the podcast is permanently out there. By listening to the broadcast and seeing the photos from the event, it was almost like being there. I've gotten great feedback and am looking forward to more projects like this in the future!"

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Overnight Sensations at Mill Mountain Theatre

Overnight Sensations
pulling an all-nighter for art's sake
6 short plays! Written and Staged... **in 24 hours!**

FREE admission
See the plays, Saturday **July 9, 2011**
8:00pm
Mill Mountain Theatre
Trinkle Main Stage
Seating is limited.
Call 540.342.5749 for reservations
Donations benefit
Mill Mountain Theatre
and the New Works Initiative

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TAUBMAN Playwright's Lab



Overnight Sensations is the brainchild of Todd Ristau. In 2006, while working as the Literary Associate at Mill Mountain Theatre, he was asked to come up with an innovative fundraising event for the theatre. He was also only given 24 hours to devise his proposal.

Thinking quickly, he remembered 24 Hour Plays project in New York and decided to come up with a local version with a few unique twists designed to promote community involvement.

The result was Overnight Sensations and it was an overnight success. Ever since the start of the Playwright's Lab the following year, this annual micro-brewed new play festival has been conducted in close collaboration with the playwriting program at Hollins University.

Here's how it works: You take 6 playwrights and randomly pair them with 6 directors. For each playwright, randomly select a genre, a location, and a theme.

Add several writing prompts. For each director, randomly select a cast list composed of 6 local actors (including some celebrities, board members from arts organizations, arts columnists, merchants, students and even a few real experienced actors). Overnight, the playwrights write ten-minute plays and from 8AM to Noon, the writer and director collaborate on revisions and prop collection. At Noon, actors are added and they rehearse until 5PM. At 5PM light and sound cues are set. At 7:30 the audience is let in, and at 8PM the curtain goes up.

Overnight Sensations is great fun and always well attended. It is also an excellent opportunity for our grad students to get practical, hands-on, low-risk experience in putting on a play and mounting a festival. Some of our students participated as writers, directors, actors, technicians, front of house, and even publicity. All participated as audience members.

Because of the Playwright's Lab's involvement, this local theatre event is able to include participation by some of the biggest names in theatre from all around the country. Visiting faculty member Bob Moss, who founded Playwright's Horizons, directed a play written by MFA playwright Samantha Macher. MFA playwright Rebecca Osborne directed a play by local newspaper editor Dwayne Yancey with MFA playwright Wendy-Marie Foerster in the cast. Kenley Smith, Artistic Director of Studio Roanoke and a graduate of the program, directed a new play by Todd London, Artistic Director of New Dramatists in New York.

Other students involved included Rebecca Quirk providing tech support with help from Jonathan G Galvez. Jeri Weiss and Avis Gray were co-House Managers, Chad Runyon helped coordinate the event and also acted in one of the plays. Scott Ramsburg wrote a musical directed by Todd Ristau with Kevin Ferguson

performing. Taylor Gruenloh wrote a piece directed by Charlie Boswell that featured Darlene Fedele, Anne G'Fellers-Mason, and Marshall Opie. Elizabeth Heffron's play was directed by Drew Dowdy.

Admission was free and over two hundred people were served!



www.millmountain.org

Reading of Adam Hahn's *KONG: a goddam 30 foot gorilla* at Studio Roanoke



Adam Hahn was in the first cohort of writers in the playwriting program at Hollins, and this is his final summer as a student. Last summer, Adam took the Adaptation class with visiting faculty member Jeff Goode where he began adapting the classic horror film, *King Kong*.

Adam recalled, "Of all the projects I was considering for that class, Jeff pushed me toward the most difficult one. It seemed impossible to put *King Kong* on stage. And, it is."

As much as possible, the

playwright focused on the original black and white version of the movie.

"I can't say that none of my thinking was influenced by other versions, but the original is the reference that I used," Hahn explained.

He continued tinkering with the script and had a professional reading at SkyPilot Theatre in Los Angeles earlier this year.

This month *KONG* was included in Studio Roanoke's Guerilla Playhouse reading series. MFA playwright Ben R. Williams curates the series and told us, "Adam sent us the play and said he'd like us to consider it. As soon as I saw the title I was interested and after five pages I knew I wanted to do it at Guerilla Playhouse."

Kenley Smith, graduate of the program and Artistic Director at Studio Roanoke, directed the piece.

"*King Kong* always one of my great loves as a kid," Smith

said. "I was so intrigued by what Adam's treatment could possibly be. It just seemed like one of those impossible tasks for a playwright. Adam is a person of great faith, in directors and the technical capacities of theatres. The goal was to do it on as low a budget as possible, to keep it honest, keep it lively and to keep it fun."

The play adapts the film for the stage, but includes backstory and commentary on the action from the characters in the film. For the reading, minimal costumes were provided and above the actors were projected toys to represent the monsters on the island on a budget of only \$45.

"This script is designed to consume all possible resources a theatre has," Hahn quipped in the talk back. "Ideally, in a fully realized production, every member of the audience would be killed. There would be monsters eating you and train cars crashing down on top of you."

When asked how this staged reading compared with the

previous reading at SkyPilot, Hahn replied, "This was actually much more fun. We did it in LA without any special effects at all. So, this was the biggest budget production so far."

Smith and Williams are considering the play for an even bigger budget production as part of the main stage season at Studio Roanoke, perhaps as early as next season.



Performance by Café Antarsia Ensemble

Ruth Margraff has taught graduate playwriting at the Yale School of Drama, Brown University, UT Austin's Michener Center for Writers, Iowa Playwrights' Workshop among other places. She has received many awards in playwriting from the Fulbright, Rockefeller, NEA, TCG, TMUNY, Jerome, and NYSCA foundations. Ruth's plays are produced nationally and internationally and have been widely published. She is currently Associate Professor of writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and this summer came to Hollins to teach courses in Experimental Playwriting and Playscript Analysis.

Ruth also tours with Café

Antarsia Ensemble, a group which performs music in a Balkan/Gypsy style.

Students this summer were treated to a performance by the group at Studio Roanoke.

"I've always played music and I started having a lot of songs in my plays," Ruth said. "Then, the songs just kind of started taking over. I'm inspired by other genres, too. I encourage the students to soak up everything they have here because there's so many beautiful spaces that are just sitting there. This is an inspiring place to be, and also a beautiful place to write. Take advantage of every minute!"



www.cafeantarsia.com

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Guest Profile: John Bergman



John Bergman currently teaches at Lesley University and is the Coordinator of the Psychodrama/Drama Therapy specialization for the graduate Expressive Therapies Division. John has spent over 30 years as a drama therapist and master teacher with prisoners and prison officers, men, women and children in criminal justice settings, detention centers, indigenous communities and mental health centers all over the world. He has spent the past six years working in Australia in corrections and outback communities and has recently moved back to the States. He is the founder and Director of Stonewall Arts Project, Inc./Geese Theatre Company USA, (touring and treating staff and prisoners) as well as a founder and teacher of Geese Company UK and Transcena in Romania. These are drama and drama-therapy based companies. He has presented internationally at over 500 professional conferences, treatment seminars, and conventions and is the recipient of the 2005 Research Award from the National Association of Drama Therapists.

John came to Hollins this summer to talk about his life and work in the theatre. He also conducted an extensive afternoon workshop in improvisation techniques for our playwrights and members of the local theatre community.

Lab Program Director Todd Ristau was a member of Bergman's Geese Theatre Company in 1982, and he helped facilitate the workshop by running a physical workout/warm up session first.

You're a drama therapist who specializes in improvisation and you primarily work in prisons... what brought you to Hollins?

I've known Todd for years and years and years. Todd's an extraordinary man who I have a great amount of admiration for. He's an original and what he's done here at Hollins is quite inspirational. He cares with an incredible deep and strong care. When you are like that and you ask me to do something, and I know you, I'll be there.



Is it unusual to work with playwrights like this?

It is a rarity in a writing program to get up there and learn and feel how it is this stuff actually works and what an actor really does and doesn't do. How you can then write what will take actors to those places. I'm enormously knocked out that he invited me here and it's a trip to be with you. It's really something else, they don't normally do stuff like that, so you're really lucky bastards.

What was it like to transition away from theatre and into drama therapy?

When you're a theatre person,

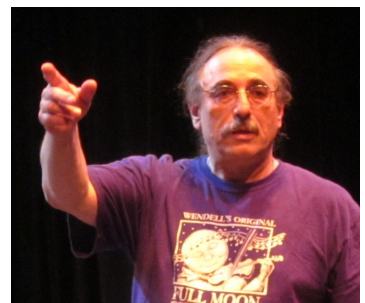
and you've done theatre for a long time, you desperately don't want to be known as a therapist. You want to still be known as a creative person, but then you get into that world and you discover how unbelievably creative it is. I teach all my therapists to continue to do theatre, and to do as much of it as possible because theatre is such an extraordinary thing that opens up the possibilities for us and for the audience. And in the theatre *everything* is possible. And, of course, people make

constantly. Life and drama are indistinguishable from each other. Catharsis is a medical term. Thousands of years ago, the Romans turned around and said, "Look, if someone is really depressed, they need to go and see a *play*." Theatre is one of those natural things that we send people to in order to feel. To go and feel better, to go and feel worse... It's not a weird thing, it's not a new thing, it's not an old thing, it's an *always* thing. The American economic system right now doesn't recognize theatre, but the American economic system only recognizes oil companies. There's no money to be made in theatre, because the story is constantly being told. Is theatre recognized in terms of funding? Who gives a damn? It's recognized by people continuously and constantly and it always has been. The theatre is dying? It isn't. Theatre's not dead and it has never died.

What is the key to fearlessness?

You have to truly experience your fear, go and live with it, side by side while you do the things that you have to do. Never put away what you fear. When you're working in the joint, a lot of the time you don't have the time to feel afraid, but you *will* get confronted. Somebody *will* say, "I'm gonna kill you." Someone *will* say, "I hate you." But, people will do that in the free world as well and you just live with it. You live with it. It's just simple courage, that's all. Nothing very special about it.

theatre all the time. They never stop. You talk to men and women who are doing anything from the most menial to the most grand of jobs and they love to talk about themselves, or to talk about an accident they just saw. Everybody does theatre constantly. We watch television, which is filled with theatre. We go to the movies, it's just simply theatre. This country is addicted to theatre. It can't get away from it. It does games and video games which are nothing but more theatre. And fantasy, which is more theatre. It doesn't stop. It's all theatre. The thing that is called *The Theatre* is often deadly, and dull, just exactly as Peter Brook said. Theatre is something that occurs



www.geesetheatre.com

Festival of Student Readings



The Festival of Student Readings is an annual event that falls during the last full weekend of each summer session of the playwriting program.

Play readings are an important part of the playwright's process, as nothing is more beneficial than working with actors and hearing the words in your play out loud in a theatre space where you can get feedback from the general public, your peers, and guest professionals as responders.

Plays read at our previous festivals have won awards, gone on to full productions at professional theatres and even been published.

Our guest responders come from all fields in the theatre and travel from major theatre centers in the United States and Great Britain just to participate.

Readings are script in hand, without props or costumes, and focusing on the text rather than spectacle. Many are directed by the playwright, although we have a growing database of directors as well as actors who are available to work with our student writers. Readings are allowed a maximum of 7 hours

of rehearsal so that students are not tempted to concentrate on the event to the detriment of their academic work.

Plays in the festival are selected from the entire body of work of students currently enrolled in the program and are chosen based on production readiness of the current draft as well as helping to demonstrate the range of voices and interests of our current playwrights.

In all cases, guests and playwrights are told that this is not an opportunity to be discovered but to interact with visiting professionals through the work, and using that work to help build the reputation of the program as well as develop a growing local audience for new plays.

A brief, moderated talkback follows each reading.

This year's festival was held on the main stage of Mill Mountain Theatre, and we anticipate that this strengthening of our relationship with that professional theatre will continue to grow in coming years.

Mead Hunter has an MFA in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism from Yale University and among his many credits, he served for several years as Portland Center Stage's Director of Literary and Education Programs. He came to Hollins this summer as a guest speaker and one of the professional guest responder for the festival.

"I think this is absolutely amazing," Hunter told us of his time at Hollins. "First of all because I love theatre marathons and I love to be exposed to new work and to new writers. Ten plays in three days is playwright Heaven for me. This is all my idea of a very good time. To come and meet a lot of creative intelligences. What I'm looking for in a new play is a voice. I'm not so concerned about form, structure, even content. The important thing to me is really the voice... a unique voice that I've never heard before, that is the perfect expression of the person I'm hearing from. I want to come back. I'm going to be campaigning! Because I just want to be part of it."

In addition to Mead and our faculty, this year's guests also included Jason Aaron Goldberg (Original Works Publishing), Jeff Goode (playwright), Larry Harbison (Smith & Kraus), Sandra Hosking (InSIGHT for Playwrights), Gina Kaufmann (director), Brett Neveu

(playwright), Lisa Schlesinger (playwright), and Peter Ullian (playwright).

The plays read included:

Bo-Nita by Elizabeth Heffron

The Veil by Samantha Macher

The Cavern of the Sun by Darlene Fedele

Carolina Dive by Neeley Gossett

Haemon by Adam Hahn

Radar Range by Maura Campbell

Tibet by Robert Plowman

Lost in Crossing by Jonathan G Galvez

Web of Terror by MB DuMonde

Am I Black Enough, Yet? by Clinton Johnston

MFA playwright Neeley Gossett summed up her time in the program by saying, "I'm finished with my MFA course work, only a thesis to go. The four summers spent at The Playwrights Lab at Hollins University were the most important and productive times of my creative life. I'm a different writer than I was when I started"



Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Todd Ristau, Director
Graduate Program in Playwriting
Hollins University
PO Box 9602
Roanoke, VA 24020-1602
Phone: 540.362.6386
Fax: 540.362.6465
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For application materials, please call (540) 362-6326 or visit on the web at www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting for more information.

Friend us on Facebook!

From the Director: Summer Session Recap

I'm always surprised at how much we manage to accomplish in a single six-week session.

We really do manage to cram an entire academic year into one summer.

This summer saw seven new playwrights enter the program and nearly as many beginning their final year of classes.

We had some amazing guests come to visit and conduct workshops with our students.

We had full productions of student work with guest professional directors at local theatres, as well as readings, No Shame Theatre, Overnight Sensations, and a lot of student initiated events.

We had classes in the history of

Off-off Broadway and arts management taught by the legendary Bob Moss and a course in non-linear playwriting by the amazing Ruth Margraff.

We had guest performances by Café Antarsia Ensemble and Hamell on Trial.

And we wrote our butts off. Students in the First Drafts class all wrote six complete new plays, at least two of them full-length and over 100 pages each.

At the Festival of Student Readings, we saw ten plays of tremendous variety. One even got a standing ovation.

Think about that. A standing ovation for a *reading* of a play.

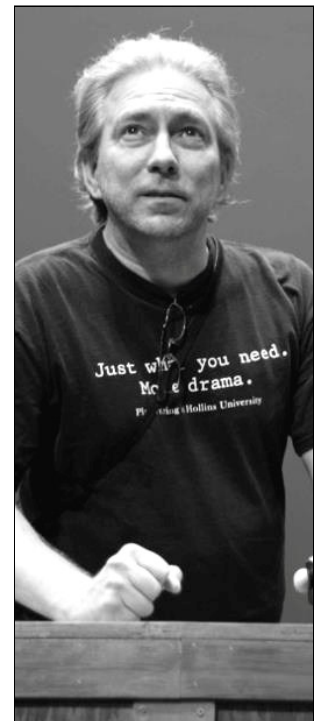
I'm so impressed with the energy of our students, the

cohesion of our community, the generosity of our guests, the expertise of our faculty and the quality of the work being generated here at Hollins that I have no hesitation in saying we're one of the best places to study playwriting in the nation.

That's not hyperbole. That's not marketing. That's just my unshakeable opinion and a lot of people out there in the profession agree.

I want to thank everyone who helped, and who continues to help, make that possible.

I'm already planning for next summer, and confident that it will be even more amazing than this one has been.



Todd Ristau, Director